

ALLEGRA, James W.

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN
RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION.

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A Guide for Parents of Children Receiving Special Education

REHABILITATION LITERATURE

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James W. Allegra

THE INCREASE AND REFINEMENT of special education programs create a need to involve parents further in the total development of their child. The child spends the better part of his day in and around his home. Why shouldn't this period be constructive?

Parents have wanted to help, but, lacking direction, they have placed sole responsibility on the school. Today, however, they are being included in modern educational programs. In the following I attempt to provide some basic general suggestions in response to questions often asked by parents of children receiving special education.

Courage to face the problem is of prime importance before an effective program can begin. A child is placed in a special educational environment because of his difficulty in operating effectively in a "regular classroom setting." This placement is to be faced realistically—neither taken lightly nor met with alarm. It is for *the benefit of the child* and must be accepted as such. There are cases in which the child readily accepts the special setting, only to have the parents create obstacles with statements such as: "It will only be for a short while," or "If you don't like the class after a week or so, we will take you out." I need not elaborate on the difficulties these attitudes create.

A situation must be dealt with as it exists at the moment, not on what its predicted outcome might be. Although some children do improve as they enter another developmental stage, this is not the rule; an effective program cannot be constructed on this premise.

What Can Be Done at Home?

A common problem of most children in this educational area is the lack of proper organization. The skill to organize is basic and enables a youngster to develop a logical approach and a sense of self-reliance important to the child and hence to any program of instruction. A degree of structure at home is most important in this respect. A schedule for various activities might include a homework period, a household job period, a preparation period, and bedtime. These periods involve only a small part of the total day, and care must be taken not to overload.

Homework may be done after school, before dinner, or after a TV program. Let the youngster choose; it is his option. Once a time period has been established, it must be kept. The child finds safety, comfort, security, and reassurance from the reliability of enforced organization, even though he may balk at times.

A "preparation period" is a specific time when all materials are checked by parent and child and placed in readiness for the next day. A folder of some sort is necessary to place all materials together. After everything is checked, it is placed in the case ready to be brought to school. This virtually eliminates last minute confusion.

A household job is helpful in earning an allowance and developing responsibility. Rigid structure need not apply to this as it does to the other activities. It should be introduced only after substantial progress is shown in the other activity levels. It should be something the child likes and something of short duration. It is not wise to create resistance when developing organizational skills.

Thus, a pattern of responsibility is begun that at first is fully controlled by the parent, then gradually is shifted to the child.

How Much Academic Help Should Be Given at Home?

There is no substitute for a parent-teacher conference prior to any formulation of a self-help program. Supplementary help is not a cure-all and it is not advisable in all cases. The teacher is in a position to determine what is best for the youngster, based on his experiences in class. The teacher's background and professional judgment should be utilized. If supplementary studies are desirable, he is in the best position to examine the positive or negative results of such a program and its implementation.

Supplementary help takes one of two forms: parental or lay help in the form of supervision, tutoring, or both, or professional tutoring. One or a combination of both approaches may be decided upon.

(When I talk with parents, I *usually* request that they volunteer their help to the child. I strongly oppose unrequested assistance, in that there is little lasting effect.) A child who asks for help is receptive, and positive learning can take place. The initiative for help should come from the youngster, who is responsible for his own work.

If tutoring is desirable, some guidelines are helpful. Consistency is of prime importance; periods should be of short duration and at regular intervals. Long sessions of an hour or more should be avoided. (It has been my experience that "blitzing" a subject does not bring about desirable long-range results; more concrete results seem to be consistently achieved by utilizing short, regular periods of concentrated effort.)

It must be mentioned that, in the zeal to help him, the danger of overburdening the child exists. All children are individuals and what motivates one may not work with another. Additional pressure is usually not the technic to greater success. Remember, a child is placed in a special setting because of his difficulty in a "regular class." Any teacher will surely be quick to admit that no "pat" procedure is available, but he will attempt to formulate an approach on a "Let's see" basis. What works today may not bring results at a later time. It is as important for the parent to know what is being done in school as it is for the teacher to know about the home.

A final word concerning parent-teacher conferences: If the initiative for a parent-teacher conference does not come from the school, then the parent should assume the responsibility. The mechanics are unimportant; the sole objective is to benefit the child's development.

Is a Special Child To Be Treated Any Differently?

It must be kept in mind that, regardless of a child's disability, he wants and needs to be treated as an individual at his own level of development, physically, mentally, and emotionally. Before a youngster aged 10, 12, or 14 is anything else, he is first a 10-, 12-, or 14-year-old with the needs, interests, and aspirations of a child his age. A parent once complained that, "Everyone at home treats my son just like everyone else." Another asked for advice on handling her son, who is 11, when he becomes angry and pushes her. With the possible exception of a serious emotional disorder, the child should be treated as any "average" child his age would be treated if he committed the same offense. True, some children require more effort on the part of the enforcer, but, in general, the same principles do apply to most children.

Frequently parents tend to overallow for the behavior of their children to somehow compensate for their disability. Permissiveness or inconsistent discipline invariably leads to problem behavior, thus creating another stumbling block to progress.

Children desire and tend to seek guidelines and direction regardless of their reaction to authority. Psychiatrists agree that firm but gentle control develops a sense of security within most children and this feeling of security is especially important in working with children experiencing emotional or learning difficulties.

How Important Is Social Contact?

Perhaps social interaction is the single most important aspect of development. We live in a highly structured social environment intolerant of those who lack the skills to integrate. Formal education attempts to provide the tools to allow one to take his proper place. Academic skill is not enough; social skills must be developed. Children in special education often have difficulty in mixing with others outside their group for various reasons, both real and imaginary.

I know of no way to force a child to play with another, mix with a group, or have a group accept him. The desire must come from within before anything resembling progress can result.

Parents have a responsibility to choose carefully an activity that shows promise of successful interaction. These children have had their share of failure all along. The fields of music, sports, and art and various social organizations provide many activities in which the child may involve himself.

Assuming the activity group is carefully chosen and the youngster receptive, the following steps are suggested:

1. Contact the group leader—feel him out. What does he think? Is he cooperative? Caution: Be realistic—don't conceal relevant information. If the situation is not conducive, it is better to discover it before the child enters.
2. It is advisable to have the child meet with the group leader to discuss the program and for them to assess each other.
3. A responsible member of the group should be included to act as a "big brother" until the child is established. A good idea is to have him call for the child at home and take him to the meeting.

A parent can only provide the opportunity; once the gate is unlocked, it is up to the child to walk through. A wise parent will try to provide an environment that best suits the youngster and in which the probability of success is highest, knowing full well that the possibility of rejection is also high, especially with children who have had a good share of discouragements before. Parents should realize this and not become easily discouraged if one or two attempts fail. Another situation at a later time may bring the desired results.

Conclusion

The future for the exceptional child has never been brighter or more promising, and improvements are steadily being made. Never before has industry been so receptive, the public so concerned, or the government so committed. Educational programs are modern, progressive, and staffed with highly qualified personnel who lack neither dedication nor vitality.

The ability of each child to function independently or nearly independently is the goal of special education. Understanding this, parents have an obligation to strive towards this end. The tendency to dominate and overprotect is inherent but must not prevail. The child will not always be a child and, one day, must function in our society.

Mr. Allegra is a teacher of the neurologically impaired in Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J. He has taught regular classes and has had experience teaching children of different disabilities, including the orthopedically handicapped, chronically ill, visually handicapped, and blind. Mr. Allegra is currently completing graduate work leading to an M.A. degree in special education (education of the mentally retarded) at Paterson State College. He is interested in the administration of educational programs for the handicapped and is preparing an ungraded-structured mathematics book specifically designed for children in special education programs.

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